

Some Major Differences Between High School in the 1950s and Now

Anali Vargas
Keller Gifted Center, Chicago
Teacher: Sandra Cap

When you think of the 1950s, you may think about your grandparents or great-grandparents. Their lives, and those of other teens, helped to shape and mold the 1950s and have affected Illinois today. The Fifties were the years of poodle skirts, greasers, and, unfortunately, segregation. Teen life in the 1950s was very different from teen life as it is today.

In the 1950s teens used typewriters, had phonographs to play records, and were able to go home or stay at school for lunch. Most high schools had a library and most teens lived within walking distance of their school and friends. There were not many gangs or bullies and a small number of teens went to one high school in their neighborhood. Kathleen Moore said that her Catholic high school had a bell to signify the beginning and end of classes and her school had an occasional fire drill. The typical desk in the 1950s was one with a desk table connected to the chair with a basket meant for holding books underneath. Today, only some high schools allow students to leave the school grounds for lunch. Computers are probably one of the most important new technologies for high school students because most of their assignments must be typed in order to be turned in. Teens today not only get to go to libraries to do research, but they are also able to use the Internet to research and do homework. If it is necessary

for teachers to provide an audio-visual format, then they could use a television, VCR, or DVD player.

Catholic high schools had uniforms and the teachers were usually strict nuns who smacked you if you did something wrong. Schools rarely took field trips and they did not have lockers. Since computers were not yet widely available in the 1950s, the Internet was not available either. Hence students depended on books to do most of their homework and studying.

Some of the subjects taught in high schools in the 1950s were biology, Latin, Spanish, English, Grammar, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Reading, History (World and United States), geography, music, gym, and home economics (sewing and cooking). In some Catholic high schools no one ever received 100% on a test because the nuns believed that no one except God was perfect; so the highest score was a 99%. Tuition for high school was as little as \$3 per month. Some other subjects taught in high schools today are music and art. Public schools do not have tuition but something very similar called a school fee. The cost of school fees varies, depending on what classes a student is taking. "AP", advanced placement, classes and college classes are beginning to be offered at a few high schools for students who are advanced.

Baseball was a popular sport in the 1950s. "We idolized sports heroes," said Arai, "I mean, you think kids idolize Shaq or Kobe today. We used to idolize the baseball players." Teen boys had baseball teams and basketball teams, and teen girls had

the cheerleading squads. Other school activities included school plays, dances, and fashion shows. There was also a valedictorian and a class representative. In 2004, a wide variety of sports are played at high schools, including volleyball, soccer, bowling, and softball. There are also many extra curricular activities or after school activities in which high school students can participate. These include crew, garden club, African American club, ALAS (Association of Latin American Students), and the NHS (National Honor Society).

Since there was segregation in the 1950s, blacks and whites had separate proms, student governments, and sports teams and cheerleading squads. In fact, "By 1950, the inequality in educational achievement between white students and minority students had deepened since 1900, when very few Americans of any race or gender attended high schools, and formal education was only marginally a factor in national economic and social life," according to historians Mondale and Patton. Little Rock's Central High School was integrated by nine African-American teenagers in 1957. High schools in Illinois are now integrated. Hence black and white teens go to the same schools, have the same student governments, and are on the same sports teams.

In the 1950s most teen girls wore skirts or dresses everyday. They dressed up nicely most of the time. It was not common for a girl to wear shorts or pants to school. The only time teen girls wore pants was to lounge around the house or play outside. They wore jeans which were then called dungarees. Other things that were popular in the 1950s included cats-eye glasses, charm bracelets, poodle skirts and saddle shoes.

Teen boys were either clean-cut or greasers, and they wore penny loafers, khakis, and button down shirts. Most teen boys and girls in 2004 wear colored contacts if they need glasses. A popular shoe among teens is plain white gym shoes. It is now common for a teen girl to be wearing pants and jeans; teen boys usually wear gym shoes or sneakers.

High schools in the 1950s gave little homework; hence teens had lots of free time. Their boundaries usually consisted of the high school, the football field, the movie theater, and the drive-in. Both teenage boys and girls spent most of their money on school lunches, but boys spent the least of their money on grooming, whereas, girls spent the least of their money on hobbies. Most high schools now give a lot of homework, even on weekends, so teens may not have as much free time as they did in the 1950s, but they still find time to spend with family or to go to the movies with friends.

The teens of 2004 will also affect the future, just as the teens of the 1950s have affected our lives today. From cats-eye glasses to colored contacts, teens lives have been and always will be different as the years, or in this case decades, go by. [From interview with Harold Arai. [www. teenchicago.org/documents/550- H- Arai.pdf](http://www.teenchicago.org/documents/550-H-Arai.pdf) (Sept. 29 2004); Neil Kagan, Sarah Brash and Loretta Britten, *Rock and Roll generation: Teen Life in the 50s*; Mondale, Sarah, and Sarah B. Patton, eds, *School: the Story of American Public Education*; Student historian's interview with Kathleen Moore (Sept. 15, 2004); Teen Fashion www.fiftiesweb.com/fashion-wg.htm (Sept. 29, 2004).]